

## Sacrifice of the Son or Sons ?: Genesis 22 and the Question of Child Sacrifice in Ancient Israel

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**Abstract:** Among the many stories about Abraham in the biblical book of Genesis, there is one text in particular that has intrigued or irritated commentators, the story of Abraham's sacrifice in Genesis 22. There is little doubt that this text has to do with the question of human sacrifice in ancient Israel and Judah. This question was apparently topical at the time when the story of Abraham's sacrifice came to light. The article will show the evidence for the practice of human sacrifice in ancient Israel, as well as strategies for putting an end to such practices.

**Key Words:** Child Sacrifice, Genesis 22, Abraham's Sacrifice

Among the many stories about Abraham in the biblical book of Genesis, there is especially one text that has intrigued or irritated commentators, that is the story of Abraham's sacrifice in Gen 22. Whereas Immanuel Kant in *The Conflict of the Faculties* used this narrative in order to demonstrate that God would never ask a human to slaughter his own child<sup>①</sup>, Søren Kierkegaard in "Fear and Trembling"<sup>②</sup> understood the story as the best example of what true faith is about, namely that Abraham suspended ethical requirements in order

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① Immanuel Kant, *The Conflict of the Faculties*, trans. Mary J. Gregor (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992).

② *Fear and Trembling* 1843—Kierkegaard's Writings; 6—copyright 1983—Howard V. Hong.

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to fulfill what he regarded as his absolute duty to God. And until today the story of Abraham's sacrifice is used in very different contexts as a symbol of religious fanaticism, but also in more ironical contexts, as for instance in Woody Allen's rereading of the narrative.

In the context of historical-critical exegesis, Herrmann Gunkel, followed by others, had put this text in relation to the human sacrifices. Gen 22 should be read as a passage from human to animal sacrifices. For Gunkel, Gen 22 would reflect a very ancient pre-Israelite legend in which a father would have wanted to sacrifice his son to a deity who would have prevented him from doing so by asking him to offer an animal in his place.<sup>①</sup>

In reaction to this hypothesis, many Jewish and Christian commentators (who criticized Gunkel's approach, claiming in particular that ancient Israel would not have known child sacrifices) have seen Gen 22 above all as a "theological" account which would like to show that God can demand from humans that they give him back what he has given them (for instance K. Schmid<sup>②</sup>) or which insists on the faith of Abraham who, in spite of God's incomprehensible order, trusts in the same God that he will return with his son (Veijola<sup>③</sup>). It presents Abraham as a paradigm for a public that saw itself, as a result of the events of 587, deprived of its future.

In my opinion, the two approaches are not mutually exclusive, but they both need to be modified:

(1) As regards the human sacrifice: Gen 22 is not the residue of an archaic legend, but of a problem which is still at stake for the author who wrote Gen 22 in its primitive form.

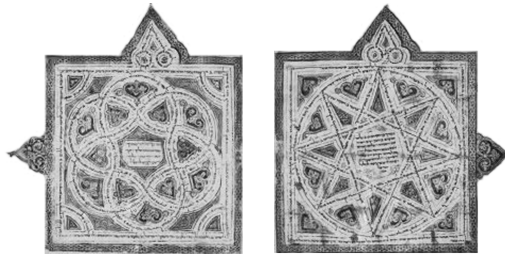
(2) With regard to the understanding of Gen 22 as a "theological" narrative: it is certainly a question of underlining Abraham's obedience but also of confronting the addressees with the experience of an incomprehensible God.

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① H. Gunkel, *Genesis übersetzt und erklärt*, 3rd ed (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1910). English translation: *Genesis* (Macon, Ga: Mercer University Press, 1997).

② K. Schmid, "Die Rückgabe der Verheißungsgabe. Der 'heilsgeschichtliche' Sinn von Gen 22 im Horizont innerbiblischer Exegese," in *Gott und Mensch im Dialog. Festschrift für Otto Kaiser zum 80. Geburtstag*, ed. M. Witte (Berlin, New York: de Gruyter, 2004), 271-300.

③ T. Veijola, "Das Opfer des Abraham—Paradigma des Glaubens aus dem nachexilischen Zeitalter," *ZThK* 85 (1988): 129-164.



In my view, the Bible itself attests that human, particularly child sacrifices were practiced in Israel and Judah, and more generally speaking in the ancient Levant.<sup>①</sup>

The idea that the first fruits of a harvest or the first-born of a (domestic) animal are to be offered to the deity is widespread in many religions. This sacrifice serves either to guarantee the fertility of the field or the herd, or to symbolically recognize the divinity as the author and owner of the crops and births. In the Hebrew Bible, the sacrifice of the first-born also concerns male children. Thus the legislation of the “Covenant Code” in the book of Exodus states: “You shall give me the firstborn of your sons. You shall do the same for your ox and for your sheep: he shall remain with his mother seven days; on the eighth day you shall give him to me”. (Ex 22: 28-29; cf. Ex 13: 2)

Some other texts reflect the same requirement, but indicate the substitution of human sacrifice by animal sacrifice: “You shall bring unto YHWH every one that opens the womb... Every human firstborn among your sons you shall redeem.” (Ex 13: 11-12, cf. Ex 34: 19-20)

It has often been concluded that the formulation of sacrifice which does not mention the idea of “redemption” belongs to a more archaic period. The sacrifice of the first-born human being would then have been replaced very quickly by an animal victim. However, the biblical texts show that this is not the case and that there are allusions to sacrifices of children in Judah during the monarchic period until the beginning of the Persian period.

A text from the book of Micah contains a critical parody of the sacrificial cult: “Will YHWH be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what YHWH requires of you: to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God” (Mi 6: 7).

This prophetic criticism denounces the dissociation of sacrifices from social justice (cf. v. 8). But this denunciation shows at the same time that the sacrifices of the firstborn human beings are part of the official Yahwistic cult.

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① T. Römer, “Le sacrifice humain en Juda et Israël au premier millénaire avant notre ère,” *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte* 1 (1999): 16-26.

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There is therefore no evolution from a practiced human sacrifice to its substitution.

The two possibilities coexist, as is also the case in the Phoenician colony of Carthage. In the cemetery of children of Salamambo there are hundreds of bones of children and animal bones dating to seventh century BCE, according to Lipinsky a “clear proof of the existence of the sacrifices of substitution.<sup>①</sup>” There is also a Punic inscription, from Malta 6th century BCE : “Stele of the offering (mlk) in place of an infant.”

The sacrifice of the firstborn in Judah was probably never conceived without the possibility of redemption, but it was also practiced as the greatest sacrifice to YHWH<sup>②</sup> until the early Persian period. A text from the book of Ezekiel dating from this period contains a very singular statement. In a prophetic discourse YHWH speaks about the offering of the firstborn: “I myself gave them ordinances that were not good and customs that were not life-giving. I defiled them with their offerings when they made everyone who opened the womb pass [through the fire]...” (Ezek 20: 25-26).

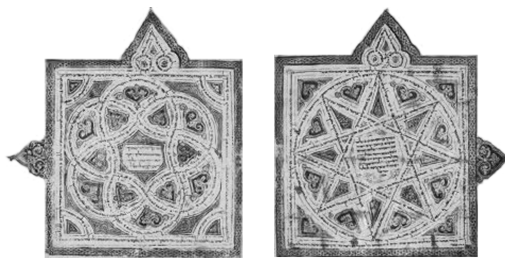
The Hebrew text of v. 26 (בְּהַעֲבִיר כָּל־פֶּטֶר רָחֵם) corresponds to the prescription of Ex 13: 2 (כָּל־בְּכוֹר פֶּטֶר כָּל־רָחֵם). The author of Ezek 20 who considers the sacrifices of the firstborn as illicit cannot declare them as “pagan”. They are too strongly rooted in the worship of YHWH. Thus the author, belonging to the new orthodoxy, is obliged to resort to a subterfuge, claiming that YHWH himself would have enacted bad laws by decreeing human sacrifices (cf. v. 21, the observance of YHWH’s laws make people live). Some biblical authors tried however to suggest that these sacrifices were offered to another deity, Molech.

According to some biblical texts, child sacrifices were practiced in Jerusalem, in a place called Tophet (or Taphet): Jer 7: 31: “They build the

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① E. Lipinski, “Sacrifices d’enfants à Carthage et dans le monde sémitique oriental,” in *Studia Phoenicia VI. Carthago*, ed. E. Lipinski, Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta 26 (Leuven: Uitgeverij Peeters, 1988) 151-185; citation 151.

② J. D. Levenson, *The Death and the Resurrection of the Beloved Son. The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven-London: Yale University Press, 1993) speaks of a “theological ideal about the special place of the first-born son, an ideal whose realization could range from literal to non-literal implementation, that is from sacrifice to redemption” (p. 9).



high places of Tophet...to burn their sons and daughters with fire, which I have not commanded and which never came to my mind”. The word taphet/tophet, whose exact meaning is not known<sup>①</sup>, is also used by scholars to designate the places that the Phoenician colonies had reserved for sacrifice, or at least for the burial of young children.<sup>②</sup> Text related to the Judean Tophet, i.e. the valley of Hinnom, mention the passage through the fire of girls and boys, without specifying their age. 2 Kings 23: 10 describes this sacrifice as offered to “Molech”: “He [king Josiah] defiled Topheth, which is in the valley of Ben-Hinnom, so that no one would make his son or his daughter pass through fire for Molech.”

Four biblical texts<sup>③</sup> mention the word “Molech” in connection with child sacrifices:

Lev 18: 21: You shall not give any of your offspring to make him pass over (לְהַעֲבִיר) to Molech and so profane the name of your God: I am YHWH.

Lev 20: 2-5: 2 Say further to the sons of Israel: Any of the sons of Israel, or of the aliens who reside in Israel, who give any of their offspring to Molech shall be put to death... 3 I myself will set my face against them, and will cut them off from the people, because they have given of their offspring to Molech, defiling my sanctuary and profaning my holy name. 4 And if the people of the land should ever close their eyes to them, when they give of their offspring to Molech, and do not put them to death, 5 I myself will set my face against them and against their

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① J. Day, *Molech. A God of Human Sacrifice in the Old Testament*, University of Cambridge Oriental Publications 41 (Cambridge et al. 1989) 24-31 considers, following W. R. Smith, a link with the Aramaic word ܡܠܚ cooking hearth, fire-place. The vocalization of *tophet* is probably artificial from the word *boshet* (“shame”).

② We will not discuss the question of whether the Phoenicians overseas practiced child sacrifice. In spite of the reservations of M. Gras, P. Rouillard, and J. Teixidor, *L'univers phénicien* (Paris: 1989), 176-180, it seems to me difficult to interpret the different inscriptions in the sense of a burial of a stillborn child or of an infant who died of natural causes, cf. also S. Brown, *Late Carthaginian Child Sacrifice*, JSOT/ASOR Monograph Series 3 (Sheffield: 1991).

③ Molech appears once more in 1 Kings 11: 7, but there it is a scribal error for Milkom, the god of the Ammonites.

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family, and will cut them off from among their people, them and all who follow them in prostituting themselves to Molech.

2Kgs 23: 10: “He [king Josiah] defiled Topheth, which is in the valley (לְהַעֲבִיר) of Ben-Hinnom, so that no one would make his son or his daughter pass through fire for Molech.”

Jer 32: 35: They built the high places of Baal in the valley of Ben-Hinnom, to pass over (לְהַעֲבִיר) their sons and daughters to Molech, what I did not command them, nor did it enter my mind that they should do this abomination, causing Judah to sin.

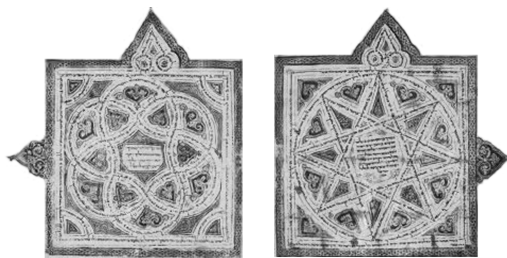
Traditionally Molech has been seen as a bloodthirsty deity, fond of human holocausts. He has been identified with the chthonic deity Maliku/Milku, attested in Ugaritic texts. Other identifications have also been proposed: Milkom, Baal and Adad-Milki. None of these solutions is satisfactory:

An underworld deity Maliku/Milku exists at Ugarit, but its attestations are very few, and have no connection with human sacrifices. The identification of Molech with Milkom can only be based on 1 Kings 11: 7, but the mention of Molech in this text is due to a scribal error. Jer 32: 5 mentions Baal and Molech in the same context, but they are either two distinct deities, or “Baal” is a gloss. The case for Adad-Milki is also very weak. 2Kgs 17: 31 speaks of the Sepharvites who burned their children in the fire to Adrammelech, but the identification of this divinity with Adad-Milki is not certain at all.<sup>①</sup>

This difficulty in determining the identity of the god Molech could speak in favor of the thesis that *molk* designates a certain type of sacrifice: *molk*, derived from a Punic word, was originally a sacrificial term designating child sacrifices. In Persian times, scribes would have deliberately changed *molk* into *molek* in order to transform the term into an idol, and to make child sacrifices an idolatrous cult. The thesis is attractive. Remains however the difficulty of explaining the arrival of a Punic word (which is not attested in Phenicia) in Palestine; and besides, the biblical texts understand *molek* as designating a deity and not a type of offering.

The best solution seems to be that *molek* was originally *melek*, “king” a

① S. Kaufman, “The Enigmatic Adad-Milki,” *JNES* 37 (1978): 101-109.



title for YHWH. The word *melek* is often used in the Hebrew Bible to designate the god of Israel (more than 50 times). Other appellations for Yahweh are known, such as YHWH šebaot (YHWH of the armies). It is therefore possible that the child sacrifices were offered to the god of Israel as YHWH-Melek.

Our thesis is confirmed by the Greek translation of *molek* in Lv. J. Lust<sup>①</sup> which has shown that the Greek translator read in Lev 18: 21 (καὶ ἀπὸ τοῦ σπέρματός σου οὐ δώσεις λατρεύειν ἄρχοντι καὶ οὐ βεβηλώσεις τὸ ὄνομα τὸ ἅγιον ἐγὼ κύριος)<sup>②</sup> and in 20: 2-5 (same translation by ἄρχοντες) *melek* (not *molek*) and probably understood it as a title for YHWH.

According to Lev 18: 21 a child sacrifice to Molek is a desecration of the name of YHWH: “You shall not deliver one of your children to mo/melek and you shall not profane the name of your God”.

This only makes sense if *melek* is referring to the god of Israel. Jer 7: 31 goes in the same direction: “They build the high places of the Tophet...to burn their sons and daughters with fire, which I have not commanded and which never came to my mind.” The author asserts that YHWH never commanded child sacrifices, but which the people criticized here thought to be an appropriate sacrifice to YHWH.

This sacrifice to Yahweh-Melek was carried out by burning (cf. the two expressions “to burn” and “to make pass by the fire”). What was its purpose? Lipinski thinks that it is a ritual birth control that allows the elimination, through a sacrifice, of unwanted children or those born with physical or psychological handicaps. Indeed, Jerusalem was experiencing a population explosion at the end of the 8th century BCE, when these sacrifices appeared, which would explain the desire to reduce births. This hypothesis seems to us, however, too “modern”; it is moreover contradicted by the Israelite conception of sacrifice, which forbids the sacrifice to the divinity of any being having a

① J. Lust, “Molek and ARCWN”, in *Studia Phoenici IX. Phoenicia and the Bible*, ed. E. Lipinski, Orientalia Lovanensia Analecta 44 (Leuven: Petters Publishers, 1991) 193-208. He concludes this article in the following way: “The translator of Leviticus...vocalized the term as *melek* ‘king’ and probably understood it as a title of YHWH” (208).

② “And thou shalt not give of thy seed to serve a ruler; and thou shalt not profane my holy name; I am the Lord.”

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defect.

In our opinion, the sacrifices by fire are best explained by a story about a human sacrifice by the Moabite king Mesha which is related in the books of Kings<sup>①</sup>: “When the Moabite king saw that the battle was lost to him... he took his firstborn son who was to rule in his place, and offered him as a burnt offering on the wall. There was great wrath upon Israel. They fled from him and returned to the land.” (2 Kings 3: 26-27) It is in a context of military crisis that Mesha sees no other solution than to offer what he holds most dear: his son, successor to the throne. The text does not say (anymore?) to which deity this holocaust was destined. Possibly he offered his son to his tutelary deity Kemosh, whose wrath made the Israelites and their allies flee. This account, which overcame the censorship of the biblical writers, allows us to explain the passing of children (who are not necessarily infants) through the fire as a sacrifice of last resort during serious crises. Biblical evidence supports this interpretation.

The sacrifice of Ahaz (2 Kings 16: 3) is situated in the context of the Syrian-Ephraimite war, that of Manasseh (2 Kings 21: 6) at the time of the Assyrian occupation. 2 Kings 17: 17 relates child sacrifices just before the fall of Samaria, and Jeremiah 7: 31-32; 32: 35 could reflect the distress of the population at the time of the siege of Jerusalem. Sacrifices involving “passing through fire” are therefore rituals intended to invoke the intervention of the deity in situations of great danger.

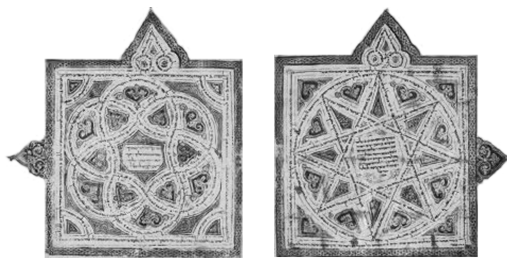
The evolution of the ancient Judean religion into a monotheistic system in the Persian period was accompanied by the exclusion of human sacrifice. Mere prohibitions (cf. Deut 18: 10; Lev 18: 21) were not enough; the idea that YHWH himself had demanded child sacrifices was too widespread. For this reason Ezek 20: 25, as we have seen, equates the sacrifice of the firstborn human beings with an evil commandment given by Yahweh in his anger.

The account of the (substituted) sacrifice of Isaac in Gen 22 is part of a similar strategy. In this text, God asks Abraham to sacrifice his son to him,

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① A. Kunz-Lübke, “Auf dem Stein und zwischen den Zeilen. Überlegungen zu einer kontrafaktischen Geschichte Israels am Beispiel von 2 Kön 3 und der Mescha-Inschrift,” *BZ* 51 (2007): 1-22.





but an angel of YHWH holds him back at the last moment, thus opening the way to an animal substitution<sup>①</sup>. It is highly significant that Gen 22 is the only account in the Abraham narrative in which the patriarch offers a sacrifice. It is true that during his migrations he builds altars, but he uses them exclusively to “invoke the name of YHWH”. One almost gets the impression that the authors of the passages in question distance themselves from sacrificial practices. Gen 22 should therefore be understood as a didactic account explaining that the only human sacrifice demanded by God took place in a very specific context (the testing of Israel’s ancestor), and that YHWH himself substituted an animal sacrifice for such an offering.

Verse 1 is usually translated as “And it came to pass after these things, that God did tempt Abraham”. The Hebrew, however, has “ha-elohim”, literally “the God”, and the same holds true for verses 3 and 9. This lexeme appears frequently in texts from the late Persian and early Hellenistic period, and especially in the book of Qoheleth. In this book Ha-elohim is used to denote a god that dwells far away from humans and appears to be incomprehensible. The same may hold true for Gen 22. I would therefore argue for a translation like “the deity” in order to distinguish “ha-elohim” from “elohim”.

This subtle distinction was perhaps also the reason why later redactors inserted the tetragrammaton in the narrative. By doing so they constructed a scenario in which a deity asks that human sacrifice should be offered to the god of Israel, who does not want this kind of offering.

The god who asks Abraham to sacrifice his son (even if he only wants to “test” him) is called “ha-elohim” (the deity); Abraham first says that “elohim” will provide himself a victim (v. 8); the human sacrifice is stopped by the messenger of YHWH (v. 11). After that the redactor of v. 14b affirms that YHWH is the real name of the God that his audience should worship.

In V. 14 Abraham calls the place of sacrifice: “YHWH will see or will be seen”, v. 14 thus replacing “Elohim” (v. 8; יהוה יראה by אלהים יראה)

These changes in divine titles also suggest in a certain way an evolution in

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① F. Stavrakopoulou, *King Manasseh and Child Sacrifice. Biblical Distortions of Historical Realities*, BZAW 338 (Berlin-New York: de Gruyter, 2004).

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divine revelation: YHWH, the god of Israel, is venerated exclusively by animal sacrifices. Gen 22 can then be read as a very fine polemic against the practice of human sacrifice.

With the help of these stories nascent Judaism sought to eradicate child sacrifice; but perhaps it would be more accurate to say that it sought to provide a sublimation for these practices.

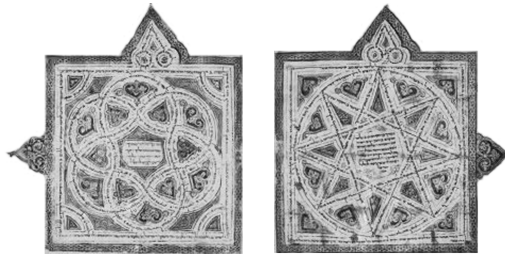
Let us come back to the divine order: Some rabbis interpreted the command to sacrifice Isaac as not being from God, but from Satan.<sup>①</sup> Another Jewish interpretation also involves the devil, but to prevent Abraham from obeying (cf. the rabbinic commentary on Genesis *Bereshit Rabba*). The Satan would have confronted Abraham with a quote from the Torah: “He who sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed” (Gen 9: 6). This shows that the rabbis were clearly aware of the theological problem of God’s command.

Rashi ( see already *Bereshit Rabba* 56, 8 ) had noted that the literal translation of God’s command is: “Make him ascend/go up” (וַיַּעֲלֵהוּ שָׁם לְעֹלָה) and tried to explain the text in the following way: “He did not say, ‘Slay him!’, because the Holy One, blessed be He, did not desire that he should slay him, but he told him to bring him up to the mountain to prepare him as a burnt offering. So when he had taken him up, God said to him, ‘Bring him down...’”<sup>②</sup> This interpretation has been taken up by several modern Jewish commentators who argue that Abraham misunderstood God’s order. According to this reading, God wanted to cure Abraham of his misunderstanding of the divine. Such a reading, although sympathetic, does not however respect the biblical text and all that is shocking about it.

The expression “עֹלָה לְעֹלָה” is throughout the Hebrew Bible a technical term for the burnt offering, the holocaust, a sacrifice which is completely burnt and whose smoke rises to God (Gen 8: 20; Ex 24: 25; Lev 14: 20; Deut 12: 13-14; 27: 6, etc.). The order addressed to Abraham is therefore about sacrifice. And Abraham has understood what God is asking of him. The biblical text is

① For details T. Römer, *Genèse* 11, 27-25, 18. *L’histoire d’Abraham (CAT Ib)* (Genève: Labor et Fides, 2023), 332.

② [https://www.sefaria.org/Rashi\\_on\\_Genesis.22.2.5?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en](https://www.sefaria.org/Rashi_on_Genesis.22.2.5?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en).



very sober. It does not tell us anything about Abraham's reaction; no attempt to negotiate with God (as he had done in Gen 18), nor to ask God for explanations.

V. 5: "Then Abraham said to his young men, 'Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will bow down, and then we will come back to you.'"

What is the meaning of Abraham's words to the young men? It is as ambiguous as the answer that the patriarch will later give to his son's question. Is it a lie so as not to worry his son and the boys? Did he decide not to sacrifice his son? Did he know in advance that God would not ask him to make such a sacrifice? The expression he uses "we will bow down" is indeed more general than "offer a sacrifice" and in this announcement he does not distinguish between himself and his son.

V. 7-8: "Isaac said to his father Abraham, 'Father!' And he said, 'Here I am, my son.' He said, 'The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?' Abraham said, 'God himself will see (provide) the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.' So the two of them walked on together."

This answer is again ambiguous: does Abraham hope or know that the sacrifice of the son will not take place, or are the last two words "my son" to be understood as referring to the victim, i.e., the animal of sacrifice is you, my son?

V. 9-10: "When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to immolate his son."

In this scene nobody speaks, nor Abraham neither Isaac (this will change in the Targum and in later reception).

The very rare word עֶקֶד (it appears only here in the Hebrew Bible, "to bind" which is the origin of the term "Aqedah") means the binding of the legs of the animal so that it does not move during the immolation. The word שָׁחַט, on the other hand, is omnipresent in Leviticus to express the killing of an animal destined for sacrifice. According to the rituals of Leviticus the victim is immolated before it is put on the altar, in Gen 22 the act of killing is kept until the end.

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V. 11-12: “The angel of YHWH called to him from heaven, and said, ‘Abraham, Abraham!’ And he said, ‘Here I am.’ He said, ‘Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.’”

The angel speaks in God’s stead (see also Ex 3: 6 and elsewhere): “Now I know that you fear God”.

The expression “now I know” has provoked an important theological debate. Didn’t God know before? There have been various attempts to solve this problem. One “solution” is to say that instead of “I know” one should understand “I make known” (already in the book of Jubilees 18, 11 which paraphrases the biblical account in this way; this idea is adopted thereafter by many Church Fathers). Luther and Augustine take up an idea from Origen: God speaks to men in the manner of men (see also the Talmud: The Torah speaks the language of men).<sup>①</sup>

For the author of the story, such a theological problem hardly arose. As in Deut 8 (where God “tests” the generation in the desert), in Gen 22 he tests Abraham, and it is the latter’s behavior that shows whether he really fears God (see in the same sense also Job 1-2).

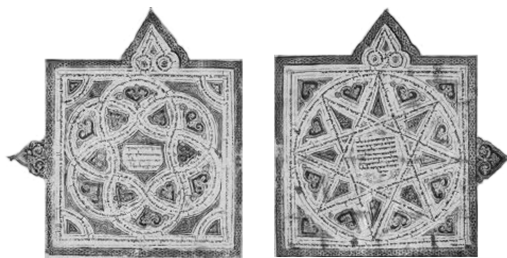
Abraham’s behavior is described by the expression “fear of God”. This is a frequent term in wisdom texts. In Ex 1: 17 it is a behavior by which the midwives oppose a mortifying royal order; here the term expresses rather submission under the divine order (with the hope that God himself will change his mind?). This brings Gen 22 perhaps closer to the use of the term in Qohelet.

V. 13: “And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son.”

Abraham sees the ram, and he knows immediately what he must do. Abraham finds a ram (an adult animal) instead of the lamb (the little one) that Isaac had mentioned. But the word used by Isaac means small livestock in

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<sup>①</sup> J. L. Ska, “Et maintenant, je sais (Genèse 22, 12),” in *Palabra, Prodigio, Poesía. In memoriam P. Luis Alonso Schökel, S. J.*, ed. Vicente Collado Bertomeu (Roma-Jáva [Alicante]: Pontificio Instituto Biblico, Huerto de Enseñanzas, 2003), 117-144.



general. The choice of the ram **אֵיל** is explained by the fact that it is an animal often immolated as a burnt offering (cf. Ex 29 and Lev 8: consecration of the priests; Lev 16: purification sacrifice and scapegoat ritual; Num 6-7, etc.). In the priestly texts, the ram is also used in sacrifices of reparation whose purpose is to renew the relationship between an individual and his god after a sin has been committed.

The end of the verse emphasizes that this is a sacrifice “in place of Isaac”. The command of the God (**וַיַּעֲלֵהוּ שָׁם לְעֹלָה**) is now fulfilled by the sacrifice of an animal (**וַיַּעֲלֵהוּ לְעֹלָה**).

The theme of substitution is quite frequent.

In certain variants of the story of Iphigenia, she is replaced, following an intervention of Artemis, by an animal. Another version is found in the legend of Athamas (Bibliotheca of Pseudo-Apollodorus I, 9.1). The king Athamas becomes the victim of a machination of Hera who makes him understand, following a drought, that he must sacrifice to Zeus his eldest son. He brings him to a mountain and wants to kill him when Zeus sends a ram to save the son with his sister. In the end, it is the son who offers the ram.

Gen 22 seems to presuppose such a motif of substitution by an animal. No command is given to Abraham what to do with the ram, Abraham and the audience know what to do.

A later redactor has added a second divine speech (v. 15-18), which rewards Abraham.

The original story ended in V. 19: “Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beer-sheba; and Abraham stayed at Beer-sheba.”

Although the story ends with a “happy end” of a sort, it hints at the fact that Abraham has to separate from Isaac as he had separated from Ishmael. In verse 5, when leaving his servants with Isaac, he tells them “Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will return to you.” But the narrator concludes the story in v. 19 with “So Abraham returned to his young men”. No word is said about Isaac. Does this mean that in the oldest tradition behind this text, Isaac had indeed been immolated, as some commentators have suggested?

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Some Jewish commentators had indeed concluded that Isaac was sacrificed and went to paradise. More recently, there have even been attempts to reconstruct an ancient text in which Isaac was really offered as a sacrifice by his father:

Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son (and he killed his son). The angel of God called to him from heaven, and said, “Abraham, Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” He said, “now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.” So Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beer-sheba; and Abraham stayed at Beer-sheba.<sup>①</sup>

This reconstruction is interesting but does probably not meet the intention of the story which is about the replacement of human sacrifices by animal sacrifices. The end of the story hints at the necessary separation between Abraham and Isaac. Henceforth Isaac apparently lives without his father, since in the chapters that follow Abraham and his sons never again appear together. Only at the occasion of their father’s funeral do both sons return to him.

As shown by the history of reception Gen 22 is a very complex narrative, but it can be read as a very subtle polemic against the practice of human sacrifice.

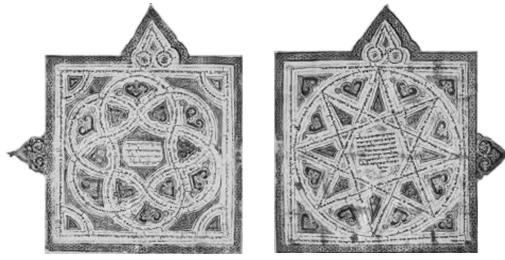
The story of the sacrifice of Jephthah’s daughter (Judges 11: 29-40) has a similar purpose. Contrary to popular opinion, this is a recent text dating from probably the fourth or third century BCE. The author knows both Gen 22 and the myth of Iphigenia as used by Euripides<sup>②</sup>.

This story from the Book of Judges reads like the “feminine” version of the one we have been examining. In both passages, a father is required to offer his child as a “burnt offering” (Gen 22: 2; Judg 11: 30); in both cases the child is presented as the “only child” of the father (Gen 22: 2; Judg 11: 3). The verb “to see” plays an important role in both passages: Abraham tells

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① Reconstruction of T. L. Yoreh, *The First Book of God*, BZAW 402 (Berlin-New York: de Gruyter, 2010), 22.

② T. Römer, “Why Would the Deuteronomists Tell About the Sacrifice of Jephthah’s Daughter?” *JSOT* 77 (1998): 27-38.



Isaac that God “will see” the sacrificial victim (Gen 22: 8) and Jephthah sees his daughter who then becomes a intended victim. After the substitution of a ram for Isaac, God promises Abraham innumerable descendants (Gen 22: 17), while Jephthah’s daughter will disappear without having slept with a man (Judg 11: 39). The “happy ending” in Gen 22, becomes a tragic ending. The author of Judges 11 knows the story of Gen 22. That means that the narrative in Judges 11: 29 is not a residue from archaic times when Israel had not yet attained a high degree of spirituality, as asserted by several commentators.

Apparently, the author of Judg 11 wants to present Jephthah’s daughter (who has no name) as a kind of Hebrew Iphigenia. This can be explained by the growing influence of Hellenistic culture on nascent Judaism

The story of the sacrifice of Jephthah’s unnamed daughter (Judg 11: 30-32, 34-40) presupposes the Greek tradition of Iphigenia, more specifically the two versions written by Euripides: “Iphigenia in Tauris” (412 BCE) and “Iphigenia at Aulis” (407 BCE).

In Iphigenia in Tauris, Artemis substitutes a hind and takes Iphigenia away to Asia. The original version of Iphigenia at Aulis apparently ended with the death of the girl. I would like to argue that the author who inserted the story about Jephthah’s daughter into the book of Judges knew the tradition around Iphigenia according to Euripides.

In Judg 11, human sacrifice is declined in the mode of tragedy. Judg 11 is silent about YHWH’s reaction to Jephthah’s vow and sacrifice. In contrast to Gen 22, there is no happy end and no divine intervention from heaven. God does not demand the human sacrifice promised by Jephthah, but neither does he intervene to prevent it.

In this way, he reveals a certain theological scepticism about the idea that the various cultic actions of man (vow and sacrifice) can guarantee contact with God. The author also distances himself from the idea of a divine pedagogy, an idea that was still underlying Gen 22. He depicts a God who does not react in the face of human aberrations, and who confronts the humans with the consequences of their discourses.

To summarize: there are several texts in the Hebrew Bible that show how nascent Judaism sought to eradicate child sacrifice; but perhaps it would be more accurate to say that it sought to provide a sublimation to these practices.

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According to Levenson, “the impulse to sacrifice the first-born son remained potent long after the literal practice had become odious and fallen into desuetude.”<sup>①</sup> The importance of the Aqeda in Judaism and its sacrificial reading applied to the Jewish people, as well as the Christian idea of the sacrifice of the Son of God, seem to give reason to this idea. But we leave the treatment of this subject to more competent authors.<sup>②</sup>

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① J. D. Levenson, *The Death and the Resurrection of the Beloved Son. The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity*, 52.

② Cf. for instance M. Balibutsa, *Les sacrifices humains antiques et le mythe christologique* (Kigali: Imprimerie Nationale de Rwanda, 1983).